

Peter's Creation

by D.M.P

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Peter's Creation

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I'd like to thank Rb and Bob Elder for supporting this idea and encouraging me to continue with it. I also like to thank L'Angel for reading this over and Harkly for editing and giving me helpful information about autism.

Dedicated to those who bring color and light in this dark world.

and...

To that boy whom I never knew, whom I will know, who has touched my heart in the most unexpected way.

PETER'S CREATION

by D.M.P.

"Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth." -Pablo Picasso

Chapter 1

"I. Hate. Clay," Cassie muttered, highlighting each word with a shake of her hand. Sticky, wet clumps of gray and brown stuck to her palms and wrists. "How in the world is Mr. Richardson expecting us to make something out of this stuff?"

Marco shrugged as he delved his hands into the muck. "Not my problem. I'm already getting a 'D' in this class, so it doesn't matter if I

make anything worthwhile now." He twisted his hands around his pile of sculptor's clay and pulled out a blob. "There we go!" After taking an pseudo-expert glance at what he was holding, he commented in a cheap French accent, "Ah velly much believe dat ah 'ave created a masterpiece!"

Cassie kept her laugh to herself as their teacher walked by them. Maybe art class wouldn't be so horrible if only the teacher was a bit more lighthearted. Yet Mr. Richardson reminded his students more of a prison warden than an artist. The man was a perfectionist and had no compassion for his students: two things that made him one of the most hated teachers in school. He was type who had the insanely ideal notion that all students had talent; therefore took it as only his proper right to constantly carp and criticize even the most hard-working children that their best just wasn't enough, and that they deserved that grade for, "the lack of enthusiasm and effort that was shown in completing this assignment." And worst of all, he played favorites with the innate artists in the class, boasting that if all of his students, "worked as hard as he [or she] did, they'd be passing this class with flying colors."

Mr. Richardson looked down at Marco through his rimless spectacles. "I see that you're working as hard as usual, Mister," he drawled, his voice heavy with dry sarcasm. He never called his students by their actual names, only Mister and Misses.

"Oh, of course I am. Look," Marco flourished his latest creation. "It's a doggy!"

The other students nearby laughed but Mr. Richardson wasn't amused. "You get a zero for that day," he scowled. "I hope you know that you're failing this class already." Then, with his long stork legs, he stalked off to denounce another poor student.

"And there goes the Crankshaft," Marco commented, using Mr. Richardson's unofficial nickname "I swear, I'll just die if I see that guy smile or something." He got up and wiped the clay grease from his hands. "No good just standing around here fooling with this stuff. I think I'll just clean up early."

"Fine. I'll go with you." Cassie started to clean up when something caught her ear.

The off-key whining sound was the first thing that was heard. Then, a woman's voice saying, "Peter, Peter, calm down now. I know you don't want to go, but you have to. Mrs. Burns is out- Peter, stop that now. Come on, Peter, let's go inside." Her voice was firm and patient, and wasn't that loud, but the quietness of the hall and the sudden quietness of the classroom made the sound travel.

This was followed by some more complaining tones and then the words, "No, no, no, no, you no go there! You no go there!"

"Peter, please-"

"You no go there!" The shout was loud and caused whispers from the students in class.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a young woman stood in the doorway, her hand resting on the shoulder of a quiet boy about

Cassie's age. By the table next to her, a boy named Joe snickered to his other friends as he pointed to the two. "Hey, look," he whispered maliciously, "it's the retard."

Cassie had seen the two before walking down the hallways together but never expected to see them there at the art studio. The woman, Ms. Brown, had a delicate, petite frame. Mousy gray-brown hair framed her warm face, pierced by soft hazel eyes. Her charge was a head taller than her. Cassie couldn't see his face - she never did - because it was always bent low, his pale straw bangs hanging down like curtains. Peter was swaying slightly back and forth, clapping his hands in a repetitive motion. Looking over, Ms. Brown whispered something in his ear and the boy stopped.

Ms. Brown waved a hand toward Mr. Richardson. "Hey, Jeff," she said to him in a low voice.

Mr. Richardson greeted them. "Well, hello, Wendy. Who's this young man here?" He tried to put a hand on the person in question as he spoke, but the boy suddenly jumped out of his reach and made a high-pitched whining noise. He jumped back from the doorway and into the hall. "You no go there!"

Joe and his friends laughed to themselves. Cassie was like the rest of the class- that is, utterly still and slightly uncomfortable.

"Peter," Ms. Brown whispered to him firmly. She brought him down so that he was the same height as she was. Looking at him steadily, Ms. Brown addressed him. Peter just looked away from her eyes and began to rock back and forth on his feet again, his hands clapping. "Calm down," she told him. "Clam down. Calm. Down."

"You no-" Peter started, but Ms. Brown interrupted with another soothing, "Calm. Down. We're just coming here for a little while, while Mrs. Burns is out."

Mrs. Burns was the head of special education, Cassie noted.

"Remember coming here before? Remember?" she went on. Peter nodded slowly. Ms. Brown smiled, a flash of sunshine. "There now," she softly said to him, "We're just going to do what we did last time. Let's go sit and sculpt with the clay. Okay, Peter?" Another nod.

Mr. Richardson was obviously very flustered by the pair's appearance. "Where is Melanie today?" he asked.

"Sick with the flu. I'm in full charge of Peter today," Ms. Brown explained. "Melanie mentioned taking Peter out to the art studio a couple times before, right?"

"Well, yes," Mr. Richardson said quickly, trying hard to mask his displeasure.

"All right then. Is it okay that we stay here to awhile then? Just for a period, before we start his lesson for the day? Melanie always had some modeling clay with her for Peter but since-

"Fine then." Mr. Richardson gestured to the table near the back of the room where Cassie was sitting. "He can sit over there."

Ms. Brown took Peter by the hand and led him past the other students. Joe and his gang stifled guffaws of laughter. "You no go there!" Joe imitated in a high falsetto voice. However, everyone else was strangely quiet, either continuing their work as if Peter and Ms. Brown didn't exist or sneaking glances at them while making their sculptures.

Cassie started down at her work when Peter came to sit across from her. He had his eyes downcast also, and the rocking and clapping didn't stop. Ms. Brown got him some sculptor's clay. "Here, Peter. Remember, roll up your sleeves." She helped him do it, which was hard considering that Peter wasn't helping. Yet when Peter's eyes met the clay, he suddenly calmed down and picked up the piece.

For a few minutes, no one made a single sound. Then Cassie looked up expecting to see a boy covered and dirty, acting like a grown up pre-schooler. Yet what she saw was Peter intently working on his piece of clay. He was ethereally calm, and the clay flowed and changed beneath his fingertips like magic. Ms. Brown watched him in silence with another soft smile on her face.

Cassie watched Peter for a few moments, amazed. What he was doing seemed simply remarkable. There was no clumsiness in his actions when he was sculpting; everything seemed to meld and transform ever so gently. Soon, what was a shapeless mound had elegant curves and minute texture. Almost like when I'm morphing, Cassie thought to herself. How everything changes so beautifully....

Without her realizing it, Cassie whispered, "How can he do that?"

Ms. Brown caught her eyes and Cassie blushed. "Not that I think he can't do it or anything," Cassie stuttered, "I mean, that-uh..."

"Peter is autistic," Ms. Brown explained quietly. "But that doesn't mean that he's incapable to doing anything. He just sees things differently." She watched the boy work for a few more moments. "Most autistic children act very quiet and keep to themselves, like they're in their own little worlds. Usually they have one certain thing that they are intensely interested in, whether it be trains, geography or math. Peter has a wonderful talent with sculpting." Ms. Brown stopped from there and blushed slightly. It seemed like she never talked to a student so much about Peter. Or that a student never asked about him before.

Choosing the words carefully, Cassie asked, "Does he have any finished work?"

"Of course. Peter has an unusual sense of creativity with his artwork. He has various works at his home; I've seen them. There's one piece that like a giant worm almost, and another of this strange-looking deer. And it was all so finely made! In fact his parents...." Ms. Brown stopped there, and a sad look came across her face.

"Oh." Cassie suddenly remembered the reason why for Ms. Brown's

sadness. It was all over the local news and in the papers. Peter's parents were missing for about six months now, presumed dead. The events surrounding it seemed quite odd. Peter and his parents were going to their weekly visit trip to a local doctor in another town when they disappeared. Peter was found days later, roaming the woods off the highway, a hundred yards from where the car was found. However, his parents were never seen since.

"I'm- I'm sorry," Cassie apologized. "How....how is he taking it?"

"It's hard," Ms. Brown said. She paused for a long time before she continued. "He's been living with an uncle and it's been really rough on him - and his uncle too. It took him a very, very long time to adjust but... it's just been a very difficult time for him." She didn't say much after that, and both of them were quiet. Both were amazed by how deftly Peter handled the clay, and basked in the hushed scarcity of his talent.

Soon, Marco came back from the studio's adjoining washroom, his hands clean. "Hey, Cassie, you're gonna have dry muck all over you hands if you don't clean up now," he started, then stopped when he saw Peter.

Like everyone else, he just looked at Peter awkwardly for a few moments. Then, he said, "Hey, Peter," very quickly and sat down. Strangely enough, even Marco, who could joke about anything, retained that silence that people usually have when they first see Peter. At least Peter didn't notice; he seemed to be so absorbed with his work that it didn't matter.

Peter's hands seemed to have a mind of their own. Flowing down the clay, making slight details and adjustments, carefully styling his creation, the technique was a precise yet spontaneous motion. What seemed to form was a standing figure, about six inches high. Cassie couldn't make out exactly what it was, for Peter's moving hands blocked her view, but something in the back of her mind was bothering her about it.

After about five minutes of watching, Cassie looked down at her hands. Marco was right. Her hands were powdered white from dried clay, and the table top also. Mr. Richardson was very strict on clean-up. Cassie would most likely get an infamous "zero for the day" if she didn't do something about it.

Getting up, Cassie gathered up her clay-covered tools and looked at the clock. Five minutes before class would end. She'd have to hurry.

Heading to the washroom, Cassie turned on the faucet at the sink and dumped all of her things in it. Letting the warm water run over them, she washed her hands and heard Mr. Richardson announce that the class should be already cleaning up. Then, while quickly gathering the clay molding tools out of the sink before twenty-five more sets get dumped in it, Cassie peeked out of the side of the doorway.

Mr. Richardson approached Peter and Ms. Brown, the first time he did so since initially directing them to that table. In fact, Cassie noticed how Mr. Richardson had been avoiding them since they entered the studio.

"He'll have to be leaving soon, Wendy," he informed Ms. Brown, referring to Peter.

The lady didn't seem to be listening to him. She was looking at Peter's creation in awe. "Why, Peter," she breathed, "this is amazing!" Peter didn't seem to be paying attention to her, his head still bowed down low over his work.

Marco sat across from them, his face showing slight surprise, then subtle fear, which he masked before the two teachers could notice it.

"Well, let me see what you're done then," Mr. Richardson started. Ms. Brown urged Peter to get up and to start to clean up and Peter rose from his seat, obliging. Then, his creation was finally seen. Mr. Richardson's eyebrows arched in surprise, for more than one reason. So did Cassie's, along with a little gasp of fear.

On the table stood a miniature figure of a Hork-Bajir.

Mr. Richardson seemed to choke a bit, then regained his composure. "Why, why, Peter...th-this is...is marvelous..." He trailed off, staring blankly.

"Peter always had talent." Ms. Brown took the boy's arm. "Come on, Peter, let's clean up now, shall we?"

Peter just stared at the floor, but followed Ms. Brown to the washroom. Cassie slid past the doorway when they entered and headed back to the table.

Mr. Richardson didn't say anything now, but instead started to wring his hands together, as if he was deeply troubled. Cassie put a hand on Marco's shoulder and the two exchanged glances. Jake and the others would have to know about this. Soon.

Suddenly, Mr. Richardson looked up and saw Ms. Brown and Peter leave the washroom. A pasteboard grin stretched across the man's face. "I...I never realized Peter was so gifted," he said. "Perhaps I could talk to Vice Principal Chapman about this? I'm sure he'll be greatly interest; maybe help Peter hone his skill?"

Ms. Brown paused, then looked at Peter with loving warmth. "His parents would have approved of it, I suppose," she started. "But I'm not sure it would be right for Peter. He likes to stick with a certain schedule. If I talked to Hendrick about it-"

"Let me talk it over with him." Mr. Richardson interrupted. "I believe I'll see you later? During lunch?"

"I'm free then. Sure." Ms. Brown looked at her watch. "Ready, Peter?" Peter made a slight nod. Then, coming in the same way as before, with her hand on his shoulder, the two left the room.

Cassie found herself staring at Mr. Richardson. He picked up the small sculpture and quickly left for the storage room at the other end of the washroom. Cassie's heart was fluttering in her chest, and she felt an overwhelming sense of urgency within her. She had to tell Ms. Brown not to meet that man during lunch! Visions of what would

happen if the teacher did flashed through her mind.

Unknowingly, Cassie felt herself leave the room.

"Cassie!" Marco cried, but she was already gone.

The bell rang when Cassie entered the hallway. Students were packed into the corridor, making it hard for her to see where she was going. Just a dozen yards away, Cassie could make out Peter and his aide. Cassie quickened her pace and cut her way past the other students. "Ms. Brown! Ms. Brown!" she cried.

Rushing through the crowd, Cassie narrowed the space between them. "Ms. Brown!"

Cassie saw Ms. Brown turn around to look behind her. The words, "Wait! Can I talk to you for a few minutes?" were just about to come out of Cassie's mouth when out of the bustling crowd came a student with a pile of books stacked in his arms. At that very second, Cassie crashed into that poor character, and both fell down in the middle of the hallway.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," Cassie said hurriedly as she helped pick the frazzled boy's books up. "I'm so sorry."

The boy made an annoyed face at her as he got up. Cassie got up also and apologized another time. After sending the lad back on his way, Cassie looked to Ms. Brown and her charge. But both were no where to be seen.

Classes for next period were just about to begin, yet Cassie stood there, with the worried look still on her face. A hand touched her shoulder and she whirled around in surprise. It was Marco.

"Marco! Where did she go? We have to tell her!" started Cassie frantically.

"Tell her what, Cassie?" Marco looked her in the eye. " 'Hey, Ms. Brown, don't meet with our art teacher because he has a slug in his head?' Or what about, 'Don't let Peter out of your sight, Ms. Brown, or else he might have a Dracon beam shot between his eyes before the end of the day?' Cassie, we have to wait until we can tell the others."

"But..." Cassie looked for something to say, but nothing would come out of her throat, it felt so dry and tight. It was only then did she realize why there was so much panic in her. Peter was only a boy, a child like them who was in deeper trouble than he would ever imagine. He was so helpless; he didn't know what kind of danger he caused for himself. And his parents..... Cassie shuddered to think of what really happened to them those six months ago.

"I have to help him! I just have to!" That was the only thing Cassie could say. The tightness in her throat became worse and Cassie swallowed hard to stop it. "I just have to."

"Lunch'll be next period, okay? Calm down, Cassie." Marco put his hands on her shoulders. "Just another hour, okay?"

"They might not have another hour...."

"Just. Wait." Marco said firmly.

Cassie nodded. "I...I have to get to Algebra anyway," she said slowly. "Rachel's in that class. She'll need to know." Cassie sighed. "See ya at lunch." She then turned around and went away in the other direction.

Walking past the art studio, Cassie glanced into the room. Mr. Richardson was talking on the school phone with someone, his back to the door. The words "disabled child," "Hork-Bajir," and "clay model" were heard; he must be talking with Chapman. Mr. Richardson hung up the phone. Cassie quickly slipped away before he turned around.

Coming to her locker, Cassie gathered up her needed books and rushed to her next class. She was already late. However, an announcement over the PA system made her stop in her tracks.

It was Chapman's voice, echoing loudly from the speaker. "Ms. Brown, would to you please report to the office. Ms. Brown, report to the office immediately."

Chapter 2

"Ms. Brown, report to the office immediately," Chapman repeated for the last time, then the announcement ended. A click was heard when Chapman turned off his office intercom.

Cassie looked ahead of her to where her class was. Rachel was there. It would be best if she told her, wouldn't? But Ms. Brown could be infested by the time everyone else would know, and Peter would be put in danger. Should she go on and try to save Ms. brown? Or should she wait, like Marco told her? Cassie wrestled with that thought for a few moments, then ran back. She had to make sure Ms. Brown and Peter were safe first.

Racing down the empty hall, Cassie struggled to recall where the special education department was. It was in a cut-off wing in the basement, she knew, all the way on the other side of the school. Taking a left, Cassie turned to the stairway and flew down the steps.

Down one flight, left, go down another, right. A sound of distant crying filled the air. Cassie paused in her step. Should she really go there? It seemed like a silly thought to think, but for one split second, Cassie felt that same uncomfortable feeling of wariness overwhelming her at the thought of entering this unknown territory.

Leaning against the brick wall, she stood there for a few minutes, just staring down that corridor. The corridor looked too clean; the lights seemed to have too much blinding hysterical light; the floors shone as if it never had that much student traffic. That hall had an eerie silence except for the piercing sobs.

Cassie felt an absurd and unreasonable thought go through her mind. _This place feels like being at the Yeerk pool...._ And she pushed that thought away because its truth spoke of the ignorant bigotry inside of her.

Feeling slightly guilty, Cassie ducked around the corner into the doorway of the nearest room. Empty. The next one -a man and woman were helping a wheelchair-bound girl with her schoolwork. And a third is the source of the crying- a boy wailing as a man tried to talk with him. A fourth-

"Ms. Brown!"

The woman looked up and timidly came to the door, as if she wasn't used to people coming in. Ms. Brown blinked a couple of times in surprise and then smiled. "Well, hello again," she said warmly. "It's nice to see you dropping by."

Cassie stepped into the room awkwardly. "Uh, where's Peter?"

From what she heard, Cassie thought that Peter would be rocking by himself in a corner. Rocking, constant routines, repeating phrases; Cassie knew all that from watching Rain Man a couple of times on TV. She thought all autistic kids were like that.

"He's reading."

"Reading?" Cassie tried not to make her voice sound too amazed.

Peter sat at the table, his head down once again, but this time over a book. His mouth moved silently as he slowly said the words to himself. It wasn't a hard one - The Cat in the Hat - but the fact that he was even able to read...

Ms. Brown sent a questioning glance at Cassie. Recovering, Cassie stuttered out an excuse. "Well, uh, I mean, um, I was-was wondering if you...um, in my Health class, we're studying the way the, uh, mind works. And I have, uh, to do a report...."

"On what?"

"About, uh, living with a handicap, you know, like blindness or being deaf or something like that." Cassie got a firmer grip on what she was saying. "And I was thinking about how interesting Peter must be as your student and I was wondering if I can interview you about him and autism," she ended quickly.

If Ms. Brown was surprised at Cassie appearing in her doorway she was most definitely overjoyed with this request. "Oh, of course you could," Ms. Brown blushed slightly and that made Cassie realize how young she was. "I'd love to give an interview. But," she continued, "I believe Mr. Chapman would like to see me up at the main office right now so maybe during lunch tomorrow perhaps-"

"No," Cassie interjected. "I really need to do this now. The paper's, uh, due real soon and-"

"But don't you have class now?" Ms. Brown looked up at the clock.

Algebra. The class Rachel was at right now. Maybe I should have told her instead.....

"No, I have study hall right now," she lied.

"Okay then. I guess I'll have to call Chapman and ask if I could see him later." Picking up the school phone, Ms. Brown called the office and left the message. The phone call took awhile; Ms. Brown was talking to Chapman himself. Cassie sat frozen waiting for the call to finish. She pretended to be very interested in a vase filled with wildflowers that was placed on the table while the call went on. Luckily, it seemed as if the vice principal managed to give in and Cassie let out a sigh of relief when Ms. Brown sat down with her instead of leaving.

Ms. Brown talked to Peter in a low voice. "Peter, this is Cassie. Say hello to Cassie would you?"

Peter continued keeping his eyes on the pages.

"Peter?"

Peter looked up from the book to take a quick peek at the newcomer. Cassie got one look at his eyes before they went back to the book. They were blue.

Taking out a notebook and pen as if to take the interview, Cassie managed to improvise her questions. "So, um, how did this all start? Like, uh, when did Peter show signs of autism?"

"Hmm..."

"Well, I met Allen and Susie Faulkner - his parents - a couple years ago and they told me this," the teacher began. "Peter was just a regular baby boy. He learned how to walk and talk a bit quicker than other babies, and the Faulkners were thrilled. Except, when Peter was about three years old, he showed signs of lost some of his gross motor skills. He suddenly stopped talking..."

"What do you mean?"

"They said.... they said that Peter was very quiet and kept to himself. They just thought he was a quiet child. But when he seemed to lose his ability to talk and refused to talk with other children when his schooling started...well, they went to a doctor, and he suggested that they were too overprotective of Peter and smothered him into his withdraw." Ms. Brown gave a dry laugh, like she heard this explanation a million times before. "A second opinion pointed to autism."

"So...can he...he understand what's going on right now? I mean," Cassie looked at Peter and suddenly felt embarrassed about the fact that they were talking as if he wasn't even there, "can he understand what I'm saying? Since what you said that he used to..."

"He does, Cassie. To an extent, he does. Peter feels that sometimes...it's very hard for him to talk with strangers..."

Throughout the conversation, Peter's eyes left the book again and were wandering around the room. He got up and walked toward the wall of colorful pictures and posters. Cassie watched Ms. Brown get up from her seat and talk to Peter. "Sit down," she told him. "We will

read this together later."

Peter shook his head. "You do none," he explained, as if making a point.

"Oh, I see. You do not like doing nothing?"

Peter nodded. "Do clay now."

"Well," Ms. Brown glanced at Cassie, "I'm sorry, Cassie, maybe I got a bit carried away for a moment there. Lunch tomorrow would be fine, right? I think I'm meeting with Mr. Richardson today--"

Knock, knock.

--

All three of them looked up to see a man standing in the doorway.

"I'm sorry to interrupt here," Chapman said friendly as he walked into the room, "but I'd like to talk with Ms. Brown for a moment."

Cassie eyes darted from Chapman to Ms. Brown to Peter and back again. Chapman had a hand in this coat pocket. She knew that part of the underground Yeerk pool extended to the bowels of the school. How long did it take for Chapman to get a good ol' Yeerk comrade for this quick infestation? Or perhaps he got hold of a Dracon beam instead?

"I'll go. See you tomorrow then, Ms. Brown." The words were quick and monotone. Cassie slipped out of the room, and Chapman closed the door behind her. She made as if to walk back down the corridor, but instead backtracked and kept her back to the wall by the doorway.

"I see you were talking with a student there." Chapman's voice sounded easy. Did he have his hand on the Dracon beam now? Was he going to shoot them both? But the worst part of it all was Cassie couldn't do anything. She could not suddenly morph into her wolf guise nor could she even try to warn Ms. Brown openly at all without giving Chapman a clue about who she really was. So Cassie could do nothing but lean her back against the wall and wait tensely for whatever was going to happen next.

Ms. Brown's voice came first. "What's going on that's so urgent, Hendrick?"

"Oh. It's nothing much, Wendy. I heard from Jeff that Peter here has some...extraordinary talents with art."

Then, a pause. Cassie held her breath. Should she turn the corner? Should she look? What was happening?? Chapman couldn't shoot them, could he?? There were other people in this hall! But how many weren't already Controllers??

Finally, a scream. "Peter!!"

Cassie clasped her hand over her mouth to keep her from screaming too. The muffled sound of a Dracon beam was heard next, then the

sound of porcelain breaking.

Thump!

--

Cassie backed away from the door. She had to tell the others! Did Chapman really...?

The door open, and Ms. Brown stumbled out. "Peter, Peter, please..." Her voice was high and panicky.

Cassie came up to the teacher. "Oh my god!" Looking inside, she saw Chapman lying full-length on the floor, with broken pieces of porcelain and wildflowers lying around his head. A burnt hole was shot through a nearby shelf. Peter was standing off to the side. He started to rock back and forth and his hands hit against each other.

"Please!" Ms. Brown grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the room. Her hands were shaking and she looked very pale. "He had a gun, a-a strange gun," Ms. Brown said hysterically. "He saw going to shoot, but I- Oh God-"

Cassie grabbed Ms. Brown. "C'mon!" she cried, running down the hall.

Ms. Brown nodded and she followed. Peter looked around him uncertainly and began to cry out, having a hard time adjusting to the situation. "Peter, please!" was all Ms. Brown could say and they ran toward the side exit into the parking lot.

A cold autumn wind blew in their face as they left the building. "Where's your car?" Cassie asked.

"There," Ms. Brown ran over to an old station wagon and fumbled through her pockets in search of her keys. "They're in my purse!" she gasped helplessly. "Back inside!"

Peter's cries grew louder, and lengthened with the wind.

"Calm him down!" Cassie instructed and ran inside.

The door was ajar and the room still empty when Cassie got back there. Chapman was still out. Taking a purse off the table, Cassie saw Chapman stir faintly. Bolting out of the room, Cassie hurriedly unzipped the purse and searched through its contents. Make-up, checkbook, an almost empty pack of light cigarettes... Finally, Cassie found the keys and threw them to Ms. Brown when she got back outside.

"Go!" she yelled.

Catching the keys with her left hand, Ms. Brown unlocked the door and got inside. "Peter, let's go!"

Peter just stood there, slowly swaying, hands clapping.

"Peter!"

Cassie took hold of Peter's arm, and he screamed and jumped away. "You no go there!" he shouted shakily.

"We have to!" Cassie pushed Peter into the back seat and got in with him.

Pulling out of the parking space, Ms. Brown sped out of the lot and onto the street. "Where to?" she asked hurriedly, pushing on the gas pedal as hard as she was able to.

"Um...." Cassie looked back at the school, now just a speck in to distance. "My house. Outside of town." She gave directions as Ms. Brown plowed through the streets, with its midday emptiness.

Driving down the drive to Cassie's farm, Ms. Brown started to calm down herself a bit. Unfortunately, Peter was the total opposite. He sat in a corner of the back seat, his shoulders hunched over. The air was filled with his clapping and the passenger's seat shook with the constant rocking pushes Peter put on it.

Screeching to a stop in front of the barn, Ms. Brown fell back against the seat, hyperventilating.

Cassie sat silent as well, his head dizzy from all the excitement. Then she got out of the car and told the others to do the same. Her mother would be at The Gardens, where she worked as the head vet. Her father had to go to the repair shop to give the family truck a needed tune-up. The place was then deserted, thank goodness.

Ms. Brown had the side door opened, and was talking to Peter. "It's okay, Peter, it's okay..." she said to him. He just stared down at the floor of the car and seemed to ignore her. Ms. Brown knew exactly what Peter was thinking. He was used to routines, to schedules. And what was going on right now was definitely not according to schedule.

Putting a light hand on his shoulder, Ms. Brown whispered, "It's okay. We'll get through this. It's okay." Ms. Brown felt the urge to give the boy a hug, but knew how sensitive he was to touch, and so just, very gently, put her hand on his cheek. Peter never looked back at her, but then, slowly, put his hand over hers.

Cassie felt like an outsider, watching the whole thing from just a few feet away. "Do you think you could get him to come inside?" she finally asked.

"Wait a few minutes, Cassie," came the response. "He'll come. Just give him time."

Chapter 3

Cassie couldn't go back to school that day. First of all, she had no way to go back there; she couldn't let Ms. Brown drive her. Also, Cassie felt that she couldn't leave those two alone.

They all sat around the kitchen table. Cassie had made some coffee; Ms. Brown held a mug in her hands and sipped it tentatively. Peter had calmed down some, and along with some homemade salt clay, he

seemed happy for now. He was working it with his hands and looked as if he forgot everything that had just happened the past few hours. But, of course, glancing over at him, Cassie could never be sure of what Peter thought.

Ms. Brown stared ahead and took another small sip. She stared at the mug for a moment, then reached into her pocket. Taking out a cigarette, she quickly lit it with a hand-held lighter. She took a shaky drag, then let the cigarette lie limp in her fingers. She seemed to relax a bit. Then, she blinked twice and took another sip of coffee. "Cassie," she said slowly, "could you tell me just what happened?"

Cassie knew that Ms. Brown would ask this eventually. She sighed. "I'm not sure what to say about any of this," she said. It wasn't a lie - not really. She didn't really did know what to make of this situation with Peter. How did he exactly know of the Yeerks anyway?

"Maybe you should get some rest," Cassie offered. "You look kind of worn out. Take the guest room upstairs. Your first left."

"But I can't leave Peter--"

"I'll keep an eye on him."

Ms. Brown eyed Cassie for a few moments. "You know," she stated, "you are truly an amazing child." Cassie had no idea what Ms. Brown referred to when she said that. The woman quickly put out her light, then got up and headed up the stairs.

Cassie was left alone with Peter. She didn't know what to do, what to say. She felt like she shouldn't look at him, like he was a pariah, but he wasn't. He was just a boy, and that's what scared her the most; he was just a boy, but she was scared of him. Like the other children were at school.

And with that fear, she was fascinated too. What was it like, being him? What did he think? How much was he aware of the world around him? What did he know of the other children at school, or about her? Or even about the Yeerks....

Again, the thought of telling the others came to her mind. But how? Jake, Marco and Rachel were at school. They would notice that she wasn't at lunch. Would they worry about her? Ever since the fighting started, all of the Animorphs unconsciously felt that they should look out for each other. But Marco would be there; he'll tell Jake and Rachel and hopefully figure out what Cassie had done, and that she was safe. Or not.

Looking at the other options, Cassie thought about searching in the woods for the remaining Animorphs. Tobias would be out hunting. His territory was pretty vast; would she be ever able to find him? And she had to bring Peter along if she was ever going to look outside; she wouldn't really know how to handle him if they went for a trek through the woods. Ax was probably out running. Yet perhaps... Cassie checked the clock. Days of Our Lives was on about now. And Ax considered soap operas a prime example of human life; he was an avid viewer of that show...

Cassie got up and stood next to Peter. She didn't dare touch him, afraid to provoke him. He seemed sensitive to any touch given to anyone other than Ms. Brown and even she was very careful.

The slithery yellow shape of a Taxxon was on the table, from the bulging eyes to the needle legs. Cassie made a mental note to hide that somewhere to show the others later.

Using that soft tone Ms. Brown always used, Cassie asked, "Peter, would you like to go on a walk?"

Peter didn't listen to her. He was too focused on his work.

"Peter.." Taking a risk, Cassie put a hand on his shoulder, barely brushing. Peter jumped as if a loud noise had erupted in the room, and he looked at her, another brief glance. Cassie caught it and stamped the look into her brain. Clear blue of eternal depth. Like winter ice.

"Peter? Would you please go for a walk with me?"

Peter shook his head and looked back down at the unfinished Taxxon. Cassie took it off the table. The clay was just hardening and felt solid in her hands. This got Peter's attention. Cassie took a step out of the kitchen. Peter sat stone still in his chair but seemed to flinch a bit. Cassie took another step. Peter's eyes grew wide, but he still didn't move. Yet when Cassie made a feint as to drop his work, Peter made a sound and a move to get up.

She didn't really want to do it, but it was the only way. Playing keep away with the Taxxon model gave Cassie the ability to get Peter to go outside to Ax's scoop.

Holding it in her hands, Cassie led the way. Peter followed somewhat behind, staring down at the ground, but always keeping his eye on his incomplete project from out the corner of his eye.

When they got within ten feet of the scoop, Cassie handed Peter back his sculpture. Peter held it in his hands and seemed to go over it for any damage. He never seemed to notice that fact that he was out in the middle of the forest within ten feet of an alien abode. In fact, as soon as the Taxxon model was back in his hands, he seemed to shut himself in his own little world again.

Cassie walked to the side and yet saw no one. The scoop was empty. "Ax? Tobias? Where are you guys?"

We're over here. Ax is in his harrier morph.

Looking toward the thought-speech voice, Cassie saw two birds of prey in a tree nearby.

The harrier cocked his head to the side. Who is that young human that is with you? Ax asked suspiciously. And why does he have a small clay replica of a Taxxon in his hands?

"His name is Peter. He knows about the Yeerks."

Both birds bristled at this statement. Why'd you bring him here,

Cassie? Tobias demanded. How do you know its safe? He could be infested!

"He's not."

How do you know?

"Peter's autistic."

Tobias suddenly grew quiet. Ax blinked his hawk eyes curiously. Autistic? What is this autistic?

"It's a type is mental disability, Ax," Cassie explained. "I'm not sure how to tell you...it's kind of hard to say..." She turned to check on Peter. He never moved from his spot, not even to sit down.

How did you get him out of school? Tobias asked. Does he even go to our school? I don't remember seeing him around when I was there.

"Most people don't. Mr. Richardson - you remember, our art teacher? He's a Controller. Peter came to my class today and made a Hork-Bajir out of clay. Chapman got word and..." Cassie trailed off.

So you brought him here. Ax finished up. And Chapman did not follow?

"No, he was knocked out-" Cassie halted, then ended her sentence. "by Ms. Brown, Peter's aide."

Ms. Brown? Tobias repeated. Is she here?

"Back at the house."

Oh God. Tobias sighed. Does Jake know of this?

None of them knows, except Marco, and he has no idea that I have them at my house. Tobias, do you think you could fly over..?

Sure. With one flap of his wings, Tobias took off and was gone.

Is it reasonable that I morph out now? Ax asked. I spotted Peter a few minutes before you came here and thought that it would be wise if Tobias and I hid.

"I don't know." Peter seemed quiet....

It is all right, Cassie. I don't have to demorph now.

"Yeah... hey, Ax, do you think he could be infested?" What Cassie had done was very rash and only now she was starting to feel unsure of herself.

I don't believe so. Yeerks can only control healthy, fully-functioning brains properly. If Peter has a mental handicap, he wouldn't be suitable for infestation, for there could be a possibility that the handicap would override or hinder the Yeerk's control and-

"Oh, okay." Cassie cut in. "I was just thinking of a 'what if' there."

Ax paused thoughtfully. Early in the war, he commented, Andalite Intelligence used to send out messengers that were mildly retarded. That way, they couldn't be properly infested by Yeerks if they were caught, but still had enough knowledge to carry out their duties. Some famous spies had mental handicaps.

"Really? Do they still do that?"

Not anymore. The public deemed it too dangerous and inhumane to send out spies who didn't know what they were doing. Andalite rights activists said that Intelligence were unfairly using the disadvantaged for their dirty work. Yet on the home world those Andalites are greatly respected for their capability of not being host material.

"Was it always like that?" Cassie mused to herself, thinking of other things.

Ax thought the question was directed to him. Most of the disabled are kept under supervision in group homes. But still, they are held with great reverence... he trailed off, and Cassie suspected that what he was saying wasn't the total truth.

Both knew - everyone knows, deep inside - that there are three reactions people have toward the disadvantaged. One is avoidance. Silence. Staring. Whispering. Averted eyes. Then comments from the cruel and ignorant, like Joe back at school.

Or what's worst - or maybe better - being over enthusiastic. When a person acts all happy and wonderful only because if he acts the other way people will think he is rude and cold-hearted. Or when pity moves people to paste on that smile. It is a forced happiness, a feigned gesture of joy. Almost like those European air kisses celebrities give each other: it's just all for show.

It is very rare that someone outside the disabled person's family acts with genuine affection and joy toward him. This third reaction is what makes life worthwhile.

"I can't live him out here." Cassie looked to Peter, who was ignorant of her. What was he thinking now?

Ax agreed. I'll come to the barn when the others get here.

Cassie made as if to grab the Taxxon statue, which was now complete, from Peter's hands, but amazingly, Peter seemed to exit his world for a brief moment. He looked up at Cassie again with those eyes of ice and - was it her imagination? - seemed to understand that they had to leave. She didn't need to trick him for a second time. Was he listening to them the whole time? Ax had used closed thought-speech, but Cassie talked in the open. Again, came the thought: how much did he know?

Peter took a step forward. Cassie put a cautious hand above his shoulder to help steer him in the right direction, but Peter walked ahead. They left in silence. Cassie thought briefly that Peter might already know where her house was, but then found that he was

wandering away to investigate the trees.

Another look into his ocean eyes, and Cassie saw that he was adrift once more.

Chapter 4

"Cassie, this is one of the stupidest things you've ever done." Marco wasn't joking when he said this.

The others didn't say anything at all, because they didn't know what to say. They came straight to the barn after school, about the time when Ms. Brown woke up. Cassie had told her that she had to do something very important, and Ms. Brown thanked her for watching Peter as she took over. Both were still at her house; Cassie snuck out to the barn, making sure that Ms. Brown didn't see where she went off to.

Cassie had just explained the situation to the others as they lounged around the barn. On the floor for display was Peter's Taxxon model, a figure that looked as if taken from life. Rachel was by the horse stalls, absentmindedly stoking one of the bay mares that had her head hanging over the half-door of the stall. Tobias and Ax had just come in; Ax in his human morph, but Tobias still as a hawk. Tobias was perched on Rachel's shoulder. Jake sat next to Cassie. His hand was slipped into hers; perhaps a small sign of his support. But other than that small gesture, only Marco expressed his opinion.

He fiddled with a stalk of straw as he defended his statement. "I know you were doing only what you thought was right; Ms. Brown and Peter would have been dead by now otherwise. But wouldn't it been better if they were dead? Cassie, Peter knows about the Yeerks and they know this. They won't stop until they find them. That means we have to hide the two somewhere.."

"We could-" Cassie started.

But Marco's logic was too clear. "Where, Cassie? They're probably on every wanted list in the Yeerk organization. We can't hide them here for long; it only takes the Yeerks so long to track someone down. And if they find them here, they also find the infamous Andalite bandits." Marco stared at Cassie straight in the eye. "We're Earth's superheros, remember? Comparing two lives to about 5 billion, it'd be better to sacrifice those two than to save them and having our cover blown in the process."

"Just because we might get caught, doesn't mean that we will," Cassie protested. "We could send them to live in the Hork-Bajir valley..."

"But that means we'd have to tell Ms. Brown our whole story. And I don't think that she'd like to live the rest of her life in secret with a bunch of walking salad shooters. And don't forget Peter. I'm not sure exactly about him, but I know for sure that leaving him with the Hork-Bajir won't be good." Cassie tried to cut him off, but Marco was on a roll. "And not to mention the fact that if we take them to the valley, we're literally imprisoning them," he continued. "God, they wouldn't be able to see another human being other than us for the rest of their lives! I think their aim is to actually live normal lives, Cassie. And it's our fault that it's never going to be the

same again for them."

Cassie spoke out compassionately. "Normal lives, Marco??? No one can live normal lives, and I know I can't, and I know certainly that their deaths wouldn't have been normal at all if Chapman got to them!"

"Look, Cassie-" Marco paused in frustration then jumped to his feet. "I don't want to wreak someone's life like this! It's just better if they didn't know! We're turning their lives into living hell this way, Cassie! Is that what you want?? It called, 'Live free or die!' Wasn't that our little motto?? How can it be if we do this?? They're better off dead!" The last shout seemed to echo of in the emptiness of the barn.

"That wasn't my motto." Cassie got up from her place next to Jake. "Marco, face it; we can't save everyone on Earth. But at least we can save some. I just saved them, Marco. And that's what matters to me." Cassie looked outside toward her house. She'd have to check up on them again soon.

"For now. You only saved them for now."

And that was when Cassie left the barn. Jake called her name, but she didn't listen.

Marco was right, she thought as she stormed out. _Damn it all, Marco was right. But, I couldn't leave them there to die...._

--

Is that it? a little voice asked in the back of her mind. _You saved them only because of guilt and you know it. You sappy fool. Look what you've done to them. You ruined their lives._

--

"I didn't!" Cassie hissed aloud, but her voice sounded small and unsure.

Coming into the house, Cassie noticed silence was still in the air. Along with the stillness she felt strange feeling lurking within her, as if she was missing something as she stepped through the side door and into the kitchen.

"Ms. Brown?" she called, walking up the stairs. No one answered. Where were they? Cassie stepped into the guest room to find it empty.

Cassie searched upstairs then came down, calling their names. Coming back to the kitchen, she found a note on the table that she had missed before. The flowing script revealed her worst fears.

Cassie,

Went out to get Peter's medication from his uncle's. Will be back in half an hour.

- Wendy Brown

Looking out the front window, Cassie saw that the old station wagon was gone from the drive.

"Oh God." Ms. Brown shouldn't have left! Did she know exactly how much danger she was in? Guilt welled up within Cassie for not telling her the truth straight off. No place was safe for the two, not even with Peter's family. Who knows if the Yeerks infested his uncle by now?? And they were next to suffer the same fate...or worse....

Checking the clock, Cassie tried to think of how long ago had the two might have left. Ten minutes? Twenty? She couldn't be exactly sure.

"Guys!" she gasped as she ran back to the barn. Already she concentrated on the osprey morph, the feathers breaking through her human skin first before the claws and wings formed. Her outer clothes slipped off her changing body, and as she grew smaller, Cassie got tangled in the cloth, but she didn't care. Guys! They're gone! she yelled in her newly developed thought-speech.

"What?" asked Jake.

Peter and Wendy! In her panic, Cassie forgot the formality of calling the lady 'Ms. Brown.' She left a note saying that they were going for Peter's medication at his house! But his uncle-

"Could already be infested," Jake finished for her. "How long ago do you think they could have left?"

Uh, I dunno, maybe up to half an hour, Cassie was fully osprey now and took to the air. I'm going to see if I can catch up with them!

"But Cassie," Rachel asked. "Do you even have any idea where Peter's lives?"

That Cassie had no clue of. Maybe there could be a way of tracking them...

Jake was way ahead of her. "Marco, go to your Irish settler morph. Maybe if I go to my golden retriever, we could both try and sniff out their scent. Tobias, you go with Cassie and see if you can spot them from the sky. Rachel, Ax, go to bird for prey and follow us from the air." By the time Jake had finished his orders, half of them were midway through morphing. As soon as they were done, four birds and two dogs left the barn.

Jake and Marco had sniffed the Taxxon model in order to pick up Peter's scent and now they were on their way down the drive and to the streets. But the two weren't bloodhounds; their tracking was good, but not the best and definitely not the fastest.

The four birds of prey flew about a hundred yards apart from each other. They were still within each other's sights but weren't too close together to look suspicious to any bird-watcher on the ground. Cassie flew slightly ahead of the rest to scan around more, using the wind and her frenzied energy to her advantage.

Hey, I got a trail here! Marco called from down below, and the reddish speck below ran faster along the curving gray pathways that were roads and avenues. Cassie looked to see where the road lead and flew even further.

Cassie, wait up! Tobias called.

Cassie didn't even bother turning her head; instead, she felt her heart skip a beat when she saw wood-sided station wagon take a left at the nearest intersection. Cassie glided down to get a better look, but was dismayed to find a red-haired man in the driver's seat, not Ms. Brown.

Rising back into the air, she heard Rachel called to her, Go to the left! I see them over on Princeton Ave!

The two dogs were just turning onto the street when Cassie saw the station wagon parked in front of a small, gray-blue house. Checking the license plate, Cassie verified that it was the right vehicle. Another car was parked in the drive, a minivan. Chapman.

The Animorphs arrived in the yard of that home and saw that the front door was wide open.

Don't go in yet- Jake began, but Cassie had glided through the open doorway and landed in the kitchen.

Landing on the living room carpet, Cassie looked around. Nothing looked out of order. But her sense of smell proved otherwise. Flapping up and onto the couch, her eyes saw what the other sense only hinted. Dark red blood had seeped through the carpet and spread through the room. The pale corpse of a man lay on the floor, a bloody hole through his head. It was Peter's uncle.

Outside, Jake hesitated a bit with his actions. Why did Cassie do that? She was usually so much more reasonable during missions. But, of course, this whole situation was more hers than anybody else's...

I'm going in! Jake found himself to be saying. Marco, Ax, you go around to the other side for any back exits. Tobias, and Rachel, you stay up at front. He darted in before any of the other Animorphs could say a word.

The odor of blood filled the Jake's sensitive canine nose as he rushed into the living room. Cassie..? His eye caught the dead man's body on the carpet, but he said nothing.

I'm here. Cassie had her bird of prey head turned to one side. I think I hear something...

Jake paused. A faint thumping noise was heard, coming from the hall closet. He went over to the folding door and nudged it partially open with his muzzle. Peter? he gasped.

The boy was sitting in the closet, hugging his knees and swaying. His eyes were downcast, two stones of turquoise with a diamond tear falling to the floor.

Meanwhile, Rachel looked toward the open door again as she soared in

the air. About fifty yards away was Ax, ready to dive if Chapman should show up by the back door. Do you think it's safe to morph into something else? she asked Tobias, who glided nearby.

I could if we had too; it'd take too long for you, Tobias replied tensely. Tobias was also high in the air, taking a surveillance of everything. It was just too quiet in down there... He looked around. They were on a suburban street in broad daylight, a bad place for morphing.

Suddenly, a dog's bark was heard from the back, along with Marco's yell. He's over here! Ax raced down to the ground, with his talons out.

Tsseewww!

Ahhh!

The red flash of light was fired from the doorway, and Ax balked and turned away in mid-dive. Losing control of his speed, he flipped onto to his side and brushed against the house before crashing into the bushes.

Chapman appeared on the scene, coming from the back and dragging Ms. Brown along with him. She was limp in his arms, unconscious, most likely from a Dracon beam on stun. Chapman had the weapon in his hand put it to her temple. "Don't you even think about it," he hissed to the Irish settler facing him.

He was oblivious to Rachel and Tobias, who were flying above him. Your honors, Rachel said, and Tobias prepared for a dive.

Bad timing. Chapman looked up right then and fired, once in the air, and twice right in front. The shot went wide; Rachel swerved away from it easily. But it made Tobias make an uneasy halt also, and he lost some of his balance in the air. Below, Marco jumped to the left, missed his shot, and jumped onto the Controller.

"Ruff! Ruff!" Marco landed on the two and clamped his teeth on Chapman's shirt collar.

Cursed Andalite scum! Chapman held up his free arm to guard himself from Marco's sharp teeth. The Dracon beam slipped from his grasp and was kicked away from his reach by Marco.

C'mon! cried Rachel. We can get him! Tobias was already going for another dive; this time he was successful, a Dracon beam dangling in his talons.

Awkwardly, Ax tumbled out of the bushes. Why is Chapman alone? he commented suspiciously. For a job like this, at least a clean-up crew would be needed to cover it up.

Marco was wrestling with Chapman on the ground, biting and clawing while being careful not to hurt the knocked-out Ms. Brown lying nearby. The sound of sirens was in the air. Who called the police? he asked.

It's Chapman's clean-up crew. Tobias called down to the house, hoping Jake would hear. We can't take them all in these forms. Should we go

into our battle morphs?

No! Jake ran out of the house and to the street. We gotta go! And fast! He was followed by a white horse, Cassie in a new morph. Riding bareback, or at least trying to, was Peter. He was looking around wide-eyed and screaming hysterically, almost slipping off Cassie's equine back.

"Damn you, Andalite!" Chapman grabbed hold of Marco's hind leg, and Marco bit into his arm. Chapman screamed and kicked out, hitting Marco in the side and sending him sprawling.

Get her and let's go! gasped Marco, referring to the Ms. Brown.

Two police cars were coming up the street. Cassie galloped across the street, and a head from the passenger seat of the first car popped out and fired his handgun at her.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Cassie whinnied and reared up, stopping the squad car. Her sharp hoofs hit against its windshield and cracked it. Hold on! she called to Peter, but wasn't sure if he could understand her.

Marco got up onto his paws and again attacked. However, the other officers from the second squad car got out and began firing.

Someone, get Ms. Brown! he roared, ducking a bullet.

But how could anyone do anything? All of them were in morphs insufficient for battle, and Controllers seemed to be good marksmen.

Yet they still tried. Rachel, Tobias and Ax circled the area, occasionally diving down and raking their talons on their opponents. Jake jumped on an officer, his fangs bared. Guys, retreat! he orders. We'll meet at the barn!

The three birds of prey looked at each other. Hell no to leaving now! Rachel retorted.

Bang! Bang!

Jake let go of the officer and he fell to the ground. Just go! The birds hesitantly took wing as Jake turned and once more headed to the street. Marco, Cassie, c'mon!

Bang!

Marco scrambled back on his feet and dashed off between the houses. Jake took a different way, but paused between two of buildings.

Cassie! he yelled.

Cassie turned and kicked at the windshield again, breaking it and clobbering the driver upside the head. He fell forward, his unconscious head leaning against the car horn.

Hoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.....

I'll get there! she gasped. Go!

Then Cassie felt Peter's weight shift. He was sliding off her back. Hold on! she yelled. But she felt Peter fall off her back, and he slammed against the front hood of the car. Peter! She lowered her head until she got underneath Peter and threw him up onto her back again by raising her head and letting him slide down her neck to her back.

Peter was in a daze, landing on her back backwards. He dug his fingers into her back. Looking ahead, he saw Ms. Brown lying on the ground. He spoke to Cassie for the first time, a frantic scream. "No!! You no go!!" He reach out with both hands to his teacher and began slipping again. "No leave Ms. Brown!"

Bang! Bang!

Cassie felt the piercing pain in her left haunch as the bullets ripped through it. Screaming, Cassie felt her knees give away beneath her.

The Controller aimed again.

"Roarrrrr!!"

Jake was suddenly there in front of the squad car, biting on the officer's shooting arm. Run!

Cassie got her balance and jumped into the sparse trees lining the street. She cleared across two more neighborhoods, running between houses.

Peter was howling wildly. "NO! NO LEAVE!! NO LEAVE!!"

He wasn't holding on at all. Cassie feared that he would fall again and tried to slow down her pace to accommodate this setback. But it was no use.

Peter fell again, this time on the hard ground. They were in a small patch of woods located between neighborhoods. Cassie turned and saw the remaining officers in pursuit. They had to get away.

PETER! GET UP AND GO!! she screamed at him with equal fierceness.

The boy was bawling loudly as he lay on the ground. "NO LEAVE MS. BROWN!! NO LEAVE!! NO LEAVE!!" He got up on unsteady legs and started running back.

DON'T!! Cassie cut in front of him.

Peter hit his fists against her flank. "NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!"

The officers were getting closer...

Cassie tried to put on a soothing facade. We have to leave Peter. We'll come back for her later.

"NO! NO! NO! NO!" Cassie wasn't sure if Peter was actually responding to her or crying out for his fallen friend.

We'll get her back!

Bang! Bang! The Controllers were firing again. Cassie looked at them. Should she just leave Peter behind...?

Lowering her head down, Cassie nudged Peter in the stomach. He fell, crying. Her heart ached for him, but there was only one thing she could do: get him to safety. Cassie tried to do the same flip maneuver that she used before, but it was useless. The wounds in her side sent sharp pain up and down her back. She had no idea where the bullets hit, but hoped it wasn't her spine. Her hopes failed her. She felt her legs go numb, becoming crippled and useless.

Falling to her knees, Cassie knew there was only one way for her and Peter to survive. Please, Peter, she begged. Get on. We have to go...we have to go... Her head started to spin, and one back leg was totally numb. We'll get back to her, we'll get back to get Ms. Brown...

Peter saw all the aspects of his dire situation: the approaching Controllers, the firing guns, the dying rescuer. But the fatal consequences of this never seemed to have occurred to him; he was still crying for Ms. Brown. He would not leave.

Cassie panted and she kneeled on the ground. Now both hind legs were gone. How far would she be paralyzed? Could they make it?

The light was fading from her eyes. Everything was becoming dark and blurry. Peter...we have to go... she murmured.

Her eyes rolled upward and saw that the Controllers were there. We'll get Ms. Brown back.... I promise.....

Cassie gave one last feeble whinny as the blackness enveloped her.

The three Controllers who were left grabbed Peter by the arms. One spoke into a hand-held communicator. "We got the child, Chapman. Get the van over here."

One of the men kicked at the horse on the ground. "Should we take this one too?" he asked.

The question was answered with an animal roar. The three turned to see a tiger pounce on them. There was one advantage to the Controllers focusing only on Cassie; it gave the other Animorphs time to get into their battle morphs to act as reinforcements.

Jake knocked out a Controller with one swipe of his claws. In less than a minute, he easily took care of the rest. Now that the immediate threat was gone, they still had to find a way to escape. Tobias, what do you see? he called.

More Yeerks, coming this way! he called. He was the only one in the air this time; Rachel was in her elephant morph and Ax was himself.

Rachel- Jake started.

Got it covered. Rachel already had Cassie on her back, a nice load for an elephant to handle.

Marco handled Peter, putting a gorilla hand over his mouth to stop his screams. How are we going to get out of here? he asked. It was bad enough trying morph out in broad daylight! Now, we're sure to be on the next episode of the _Hard Copy_!

The park's close by. We'll head for there! Jake slunk low through the foliage and was gone. The others followed. Thank goodness it was autumn; at least night fell earlier. Already the sky was darkening, something that the Animorphs took advantage of.

The park was empty by the time everyone got there, another blessing. Demorphing in the shadows of the trees, Rachel tried to wake Cassie up. Jake was already at it.

"Cassie, Cassie!" Jake shook her, but no response came.
"Cassie!"

"Here, let me try." Rachel came over and slapped Cassie on the side of her equine head. "Not that I support mistreatment of animals or anything. Cassie, wake up!" Another hit and a faint thought-speech voice was heard.

Rachel....Jake....?

"Cassie, you better demorph now," Jake told her.

But... Peter....?

"He's right here." Marco was sitting next to him. "And for all we've been though, at least he has to be a bit thankful," he ended bitterly.

Peter was shaking, with his eyes on the ground, muttering something under his breath. "No leave. No leave. No leave..." Tears were falling freely down his cheeks. It was obvious that Peter wasn't thankful at all.

Chapter 5

Cassie held the prescription bottle in her hand. It was stolen from the bathroom cabinet in a house where a dead man was found. Home of Peter's uncle, his last living relative.

Tracing her finger along the side, she read the label. ReVia. Peering at the instructions carefully, she measured out the right amount, then took it out into the living room.

He wasn't even swaying now, just sitting on the couch and staring at the wall. He seemed beyond this reality in a greater way than before, and that scared Cassie. Cassie knelt down and just sat there, with the cup and medicine in her hands. She didn't even bother calling his name.

Her vision blurred and Cassie quickly wiped her face on her sleeve.

Why was she crying? Peter was safe; he was right here... She looked at the boy and turned away. No, he wasn't here, not now, maybe not ever.

Stop it! Cassie sniffed. Why was she crying anyway? Peter was safe; all was not lost....Yet another voice intruded. _For now. He's safe for now._ "Shut up, Marco!" she hissed to herself, then put the prescription down next to Peter and looked up.

"Jake, what are you doing?"

Jake said nothing in response to Cassie's question. He dialed the number and leaned back against the kitchen wall as he waited for someone on the other end to pick up the phone. Finally, he spoke, but not to her.

"Hey. EreK? Could you come over here?" A pause, then he sighed. "Yeah, it's something all right," he replied to the unheard remark. "In ten minutes? Yeah, thanks." He hung up.

Cassie asked him another question as she rose and entered the kitchen. "Why is EreK coming here?"

Here was back at Cassie's house. After the battle, every other Animorphs had left for their own homes, but Jake had went with Cassie to help with Peter.

"To take Peter."

"What??" Cassie jumped to her feet.

"It's the only way," Jake said logically. "The Chee can take care of Peter. We can't."

"They can't take him away! Look, maybe I could hide him here for the night and-"

"It won't work." Jake with the calm reasoning of a leader. "You're parents will be home any minute. I know you can't hide him here without them knowing sooner or later How would they react? They'd most likely call the police, something we can't afford."

"The Chee wouldn't know how to handle him either. At least he'll be with someone he's familiar with. Peter has no idea what's going on now, and if we hand him over to the Chee he wouldn't know what to think."

"We don't know what to think either. All I'm trying to do is keep him alive. It's the best we can do for him now." Jake added as a quiet afterthought, "That or death is all he has."

Cassie was about to protest again but stopped. What could she say? This whole situation was hers to begin with; the rest of the Animorphs just did the best they could to deal with it. Her guardianship over Peter created all the problems they had. But...she still felt that she had at least a little say in what should happen to him, even though Jake's decision seemed wise. Sighing, Cassie nodded.

"All right," she whispered.

A knock sounded from the back door. Jake opened it. "Hey, Erek," he greeted tiredly.

Erek took off his gloves and rubbed his hands together. "Kind of cold out there," he commented. Quite odd for him to say, since his android form could take most things, never mind a chill night. Maybe he was more alive the Animorphs had thought. "So what's going on here?"

Jake kept it as simple as possible. "We have someone here who knows about the Yeerks," he started. Cassie left him to explain and went to check on Peter.

He didn't move from his spot on the couch, not even blinking as he looked ahead at the blank wall he was facing. Cassie slowly sat next to him, and leaned back into the cushions. She did some mindless staring herself as she tried to sort out the confusion in herself.

First, here was Peter. True, she didn't know how to care for him, and she haven't been doing a great job of it so far. But there was something that motivated her to continue. What was it? Compassion? Empathy? Pity? Maybe it was all three, and a bit of something else too. But...what?

Was it the mystery that surround Peter? What was he like? how did he feel? Deep down inside, did Cassie hold a nuance of curiosity too, and wanted to satisfy it thought helping him?

Maybe it was the fact that she was intrigued a bit about how people reacted around him, specifically Ms. Brown. What did she ever think of him? It was obvious that he was more than a student; she loved him as a mother would a child. Did Cassie wish to find out how to gain such love for a person like Peter and possibly receive it in return?

Cassie shook her head and took her eyes off the ceiling. She did care for Peter somewhat - at least enough for make sure he was safe and protected. But that was the feeling she had for all people, right? She did still have her compassion, doesn't she?

Turning her head, she saw Peter's back to her. Then the burning question came again. What did he think? And namely, how did he know of the Yeerks??

She couldn't ask him these questions, for Peter probably wouldn't understand or respond. Was there any other way for her to know?

Cassie knew she had a Yeerk morph, but immediately rejected the idea of infesting Peter to get the information. She would never lower herself to that! Yet thinking about alien morphs lead for her to ponder another one that she had acquired before the Yeerk: a Leeran.

Leerans were what Marco would call psychic frogs. With telepathic abilities, they were able to not only read minds, but share a person's very own thoughts and feelings as if they were their own. Cassie had a Leeran morph acquired for a past mission. Maybe she

could use it, just this once...

A stab of guilt went through her. She shouldn't be thinking this! What about Peter's rights? Even if he wasn't aware of Cassie reading his mind, it wouldn't be fair of her to go through with it.

Yet just this once...Cassie stopped herself once again. Why was she even thinking this??? A moralist at heart, she was always the one who protested to anything the Animorphs did if it proved to be against her values. But she also went against them many times herself...

Well, she reasoned, _I am responsible for him, and had a right to know this. And that's all I'll do. I won't be exploiting him in any way; I need to know this for his sake. I'll just look for that and nothing else._

--

Cassie was still in her morphing outfit and so immediately began to change. The skin was first, bursting into a bright yellow, turning rubbery and being covered with little pebbly bumps. Then her head enlarged, with her mouth spreading wide like a frog's and the eyes bulging up to five times their normal size. Long tentacles bloomed up from her torso and she felt her feet and hands grow long and webbed. Within two minutes the change was complete except for one thing.

The sense hit her like a two ton weight. Her mind suddenly opened up, along with the other people in the house, revealing all their secrets. Cassie blinked her amphibian eyes in surprise. She had forgot just how powerful this sense was! For even in the next room, she could feel the emotions and thoughts coming from Jake in the kitchen.

He was worried for Peter, of course. He was in the Animorphs' charge and being the leader, Jake felt that he was the most responsible. Yet also, a vague passing thought that stood out among the rest, he wished that Peter wasn't their problem. This startled Cassie. Jake wished Peter was out of their hands. He was nothing but trouble and nothing would be gained by saving him for the Yeerks. He didn't jeopardize their situation if he was taken, and so shouldn't be the focus of their attention.

But Jake still trudged on, for Peter had some purpose. Saving him was the right thing to do. And Jake wouldn't be able to live with himself otherwise.

As enlightening as those thoughts were, Cassie still felt embarrassment in the fact that she even discovered Jake's feelings through the Leeran's sixth sense. But his thoughts just couldn't be blocked out.

Erek's feelings weren't revealed, however, maybe because her sense only worked on truly living creatures. Erek was a real and feeling being, but that didn't cover up the fact that essentially he was a machine, and Cassie's couldn't read a machine's thoughts.

Cassie paused and tried to focus on Peter's thoughts. Before, she was too preoccupied with Jake's unexpected feelings but now she tried to ignore them. She concentrated, and his thoughts were heard.

What?

Pausing, Cassie tried to absorb what she felt, what she saw.
But...

A few minutes later Cassie realized that she had blanked out again. The wavering tentacles around her stopped their movement and grew limp. Her eyes grew blurry and the frog legs underneath buckled. Cassie fell to her knees and gasped a few lungfuls of air through her amphibian mouth. It was much too dry for her to breathe properly. In fact, the cooler environment around her caused a sweep of dizziness to swirl around her brain. But it was more than her surroundings that confused her.

The sound of her fall brought Jake and Erek into the room. "A Leeran??" Jake gasped, surprised, then, "Cassie? What are you doing??"

She couldn't hear him. *Air, I need air.* What she breathed now wasn't enough. It seared her throat and burned her skin with its dryness. Leeran instinct yearned for the refreshing waters of the ocean. *No, I need water.....* Cassie felt the warm water wrapping over her like a blanket.

Splash!

Real water? Cassie opened her eyes (did she ever remember closing them?) and found the white walls of the bathtub around her. Erek had dumped her there unceremoniously and now had his hands on the tap, turning on the warm water. He was shaking his head. "Slim to none chance of a Leeran surviving in this climate," he was telling Jake. "Even indoors, it can't live without heavy humidity."

"I'll take care of it from here," Jake said. "I saw her dad's truck pull up. Get Peter and go."

Erek nodded and got to his feet.

Now up and alert, Cassie started to change back into her human form. Jake threw her a towel for her sopping wet morphing clothes and added. "Hurry up and change into something else."

Cassie draped the towel over her shoulders and hurried to her room. Pulling on a shirt and overalls, she heard the sound of screaming. But when Cassie ran back out, she only saw her father standing in the middle of the living room, talking to Jake. Erek and Peter were nowhere to be seen.

"So, a science project? I don't think Cassie has told me about it," he was saying.

"It's almost finished," Jake answered quickly. "And aren't those cephalopods fascinating? I swear, I will never look at calamari the same ever again." He made a feint at his watch. "I was just leaving right about now. See ya in school, Cassie!" Jake made a quick wave with his hand and exited out the front door.

"Well, he seemed certainly in a hurry." Cassie's father smiled. "So, really, a study on cephalopods, huh?"

"Uh...yeah, Dad," Cassie made an awkward shrug of her shoulders. "And I have to go continue my research on that. You can never know too much about those squid." She back away to the stairs.

"Fine, but dinner will be in an hour."

"Okay."

Cassie passed the kitchen entrance and duck inside for a moment. The back door was left slightly ajar. She quickly shut it and ran back upstairs.

Chapter 6

It came dimly at first, vague and a bit blurry around the edges. But Cassie could see and feel what was around her.

Color. To feel a color was something she could never imagine, never know. But she tried to understand it as well as she could. Browns and reds felt smooth and gritty like dirt or clay. Blues and greens, spongy and heavy. White was never touched, but instead, it touched you. White was very special.

The world was full of color and shapes. Waiting to be known and recognized by his sensitive fingers.

Cassie saw everything out from her view, but she knew that she was a boy. This wasn't something from her own life, but someone else's. But who's?

Movement. Feet.

—

A car. Stone blue. Felt soft, if you pressed down hard enough. Hit it harder, it bounced back. Harder. Harder!

Suddenly, woman. Mother. Long yellow curls. They felt like sunshine.

Hear. Mother say, "Stop that." Hear her say, "Please get in car. We have to see the doctor."

Go in.

Seat hard. Too hard! Don't sit down. Mother look and say, "Please sit." She has white coming from her. White is felt. Sit and be quiet.

Father come in. He has black beard, black hair. Black is slippery, can never catch it long. Soft blue eyes. Has white around him.

Movement.

Movement.

Movement.

Shapes. See. Mother don't see. Father don't see. But shapes are there in the air all around. Out the window. Tall triangle shapes. Long flat shape on bottom. Puffy shape above. Look at them.

Shapes go by fast. Tall triangle shapes move one after another, and so do the ones above. Flat shape don't move, but run forever.

Then, the shapes stop. No movement. Silence.

Look around. Why all shapes stop now? Surrounded by shapes.

Look ahead. Shapes stop there too. Car surrounded by these shapes. They don't move.

Then, Father gone. Mother ask, "Allen, what's wrong with the engine?"

Father say, "I dunno. The battery's dead."

Mother say, "But where will we get help?"

Father say, "There's a service station a couple miles back. Maybe I can go there."

"That's about ten miles!" Mother say.

Father kiss. "I'll find a way." Father say.

Father leave.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Darkness outside. Darkness come in. No! No dark, no dark!

Mother whisper, "Don't worry, Peter. Father will come back soon. Don't worry."

She tap at the window. She say, "I can't believe what's taking him so long. I hope he's not hurt..."

More darkness.

Then, Mother say, "Oh Peter look! Your father's back!"

Father come, carrying light flash. But something different. Wrong. No white come from him. Only slimy black. Very wrong.

Father come in, grab Mother. "Come on, human," he say.

"What? Allen, let go!" Mother say. "You're hurting me!"

Father call behind him. More blackness everywhere!

Must get away! Get away from blackness! Mother, mother, make the black go away! Mother !

Father hit.

MOTHER!

Father turn.

WHAM!

—

Cassie gasped as her eyes snapped open to the night. Mysterious visions and fresh memories of what happened just a few hours ago danced in her head. She sat up in bed and rubbed her temples with both hands. Her head was throbbing, and that dream...

No, she realized. That wasn't just a dream. It was a memory. Not her memory. One that the Leeran mind had brought out...

She shivered and pulled the bed sheets tighter. That color of darkness that Peter saw...it could have only meant one thing. Yeerks.

Piecing it together, Cassie slowly made sense of what happened. The car had broken down, and Allen went off for help. He must have tried to go off the road in an attempt to make a shortcut or something. If there was a Yeerk entrance nearby it was most likely that he was caught.

The Yeerks were getting more and more desperate for hosts; that could be why Allen came back to get his wife and son. But how does that explain Peter escaping?

The answer was obvious. Maybe the Yeerks didn't care about him. Once they found out that it was no use to infest him, they didn't care whether he escaped or not. How could he tell anybody about what he saw?

That was underestimate of the year. And so now the Yeerks have a good reason to destroy him....

Cassie slipped out of bed. Now that it all made sense... but something else still bothered her.

It was the guilt that was upon her. But guilt of what? She couldn't stop the fact that Peter's parents were infested. She shouldn't stop the fact that Ms. Brown was also taken by the Yeerks. All that was left was Peter, and she couldn't stop the way he was feeling right now. There was only so much she could do; how can she stop anything?

But she did do some good, didn't she? She saved a them, Peter and Ms. Brown, saved them both today. But she also lost one with the next six hours. But...

Cassie found herself pacing the room with the blanket around her shoulders. What was she thinking? She was weighing the good against the bad that she had done. Had she done any good? Did she really..?

For now. You only saved them for now...

--

No! Cassie sat down on her knees and pulled the blanket tighter. She felt so cold now. "I did save them! I did! I really did!"

But she knew that she was only telling herself that. It was all her fault; she felt that she needed to correct it. And there was only one way she could do that...

Don't make this personal! a voice shouted in her head. Again, it sounded strangely like Marco. _It won't help anything, except leave you feeling like you've never done enough. You're going to get yourself killed this way, Cassie! Just leave it be and be grateful of what you've done!_

--

"But I can't," Cassie replied. "I was responsible.."

Don't be! Look, all we're doing here is our job, and if you make it too personal, it won't get us anywhere. We have to save an entire planet, not just two people!

--

"So are you saying that we're suppose to just sit by and watch others suffer? We can't save one person's life; we have to save millions? That isn't possible! I'm doing what is possible!"

Oh yeah? Then how about Jake? Why doesn't he go out on a crusade to save Tom? He's his own brother for God's sake! Why does Jake go out to save his own brother??? Because he knows that it's too risky! And even though he can't save that one person, there's still millions more out there that he could save. He had a better reason to have a personal mission; you don't. It's a millions to one, Cassie. Don't make it personal.

--

Why did this matter so much anyway?? Why did she have to go off on a frenzy to save that woman and child? Why was she so motivated now?? There was Tom, Jake's own brother out there! And Marco's mom, host to Visser One! She'd have reason to go after them, but why two strangers? Didn't she care about her friends at all??

—

_Does she care...? Yes, she did care, didn't she?? Cassie was still capable to care for people, for anyone. That's why she was doing this, to prove her compassion. Because, she reasoned, without compassion, then she was truly hardened by this war.

—

_Then it dawned on her. The reason why this was _her_ mission.

"Are you saying that we should count lives by the numbers?? Like they're just statistics??? I know there may be a million people who

maybe worth saving more, but I don't care about that! You see, I don't treat people like numbers; that's how you're treating them! I care for individuals! And if that makes me a bad person, at least I'll know two people who'll think the other way! I'm trying to keep my compassion, damn it! I won't let this war take my soul away!!"

Something moved from outside her room. Cassie put a hand over her mouth. It was her parents stirring in their sleep down the hall. Was she just yelling right now?

Cassie got up and opened the window. A few minutes later, a snowy owl flew out of the house and into the night sky.

Chapter 7

Clik, clik, clik.

The tiny rustle of insect legs on linoleum floor was heard as Cassie scuttled under the door in her cockroach morph. With minutes, she easily slipped through the doorway of Vice Principal Chapman's office.

She didn't know where to start, but decided to start there. Maybe she could look up Peter's record and find out where his old house was, where he lived with his parents. That could help...

Demorphing quickly, Cassie sat down in front of the desk computer and turned it on. After the initial start-up, a window flashed, asking for a password before the computer's programs would start.

Password? Cassie typed some random words and phrases, but knew it would be useless. If only Marco or Ax was here with her...

No, they couldn't help. It was her mission.

Sighing, Cassie fell back into the chair. She was defeated even before she started, and just because she didn't know a dumb password.

Cassie kicked the side of the desk in frustration and hit something strangely hard.

"Huh? And what's this...?" Looking underneath, Cassie saw a keypad labeled with alien script. Was this a keypad to a Yeerk pool entrance?

Trying her luck, Cassie pressed a prominent button. A faint hiss was heard as the one of the office walls slid open.

That seemed a bit too easy... she mused, but then again, she spoke too soon.

Buzzzzz.....

The sides of the doorway lit up as the sound of lasers filled the air.

It sounds so familiar.... Cassie gasped, then rushed to the door. "The Gleet Biofilter!" she cried aloud. A deadly standard on every

Yeerk pool entrance.

Grasping her hand over the doorknob, she realized that the door to it was locked. In a few minutes, the Gleet Biofilter would blast anything that disagreed with its programmed DNA records. Cassie would be wiped out in a blink of an eye!

Grabbing Chapman's chair, she threw it against the only window in the office. It held for a split second, then shattered into pieces.

Gotta get outta here! Her mind screamed.

A blinding white flash of light burst through the small room. Cassie covered her face with her hands and jumped out of the window. It was two floors down.

A hissing sound was heard and a shearing pain went up Cassie's leg. Cassie looked behind her to see part of her calf slightly smoking.

"OOF!" Cassie fell to the ground and heard a crack. She didn't really want to know where that came from. Morphing back into an owl, Cassie flew back up to the window. The effects of the Gleet Biofilter was over and now the doorway stood clear and empty. Cassie glided into the doorway without a sound.

Down, down, down she went, spiraling this way and that as she adjusted her wings to the changing wing space of the narrow passageway. Her keen hearing heard the screams of people and aliens, a sound that never ceased, even in the middle of the night.

Dark earth walls made her dizzy until all she could see was shades of slimy blackness. The yells became louder and louder until it became almost unbearable. Then at last Cassie saw a faint light ahead, something that hurt her owl eyes.

The light became stronger until she reached the end of the tunnel. The Yeerk pool was just as enormous as she remembered it, even more so because of her small size. Masses of Taxxons and Hork-Bajir swarmed the place. There were few humans though, maybe because it was night.

Cassie flew behind some storehouses while she rested her wings. The constant morphing and constant action had exhausted her beyond fatigue. Her bird eyes slowly closed. The light was just too bright. Some sleep would help... _No!_ she scolded herself. _Now is no time for a nap. _

--

Cassie focused on demorphing and slowly changed back to her human form. Leaning back against the rough sideboard of the storehouse, Cassie closed her eyes. All she had to do was go to the cages...maybe Ms. Brown was locked up somewhere.... But what if she was infested by now? Cassie tried focusing on that, but was too tired to care. The adrenaline that had pumped through her veins before was gone, and she knew that she needed rest. But tiredness never stopped her before, why should it now? Perhaps she was pushing herself too much lately...

"Hey you!"

Cassie looked up to see a man standing over her. With cold blue eyes, he was staring at her morphing outfit, which was quite an odd outfit.

"Uh hi." Cassie quickly got up to her feet.

"What are you doing here?" the man demanded. Something about him tugged at the back of Cassie's mind, but she couldn't put her finger on it.

"Um... I was...was...um, going to do inventory of our store supplies," Cassie said quickly. She looked into the warehouse door that she sat next too. Barrels of fuel for ships and other machines stood inside in hundred galleon barrels.

The man looked skeptical, and Cassie took that moment to run.

"Stop! Host escaping!" the man yelled.

Oh, so he only thought she was a host, huh? Cassie ducked around a corner, but immediately bumped into a woman with long blonde hair. She grabbed Cassie by the shoulders and in a flash has a Dracon beam out.

"Don't you dare move, human," she hissed.

Looking into her face, another bell rung off in Cassie's mind. Did she know these people?

"Should we report her to Security?" The man asked. He scratched his black beard casually as he spoke.

"I don't think that's necessary," the woman took a firmer hold of Cassie.

The man took a long look at Cassie. "We can throw her in with that other human we got today," he said.

"Fine." The woman set the Dracon beam to light stun and put it to Cassie's shoulder. Cassie kicked her in the shins and tried to get away again, but the man had his gun out before she could take two more step. Cassie felt the beam hit her back and a numb sensation went through her body. Falling to the barren ground, Cassie briefly noticed the man picking her up and taking her off somewhere.

Blurry shapes replaced images of the real world. Buildings became rectangles and squares, Hork-Bajir became a mix of sharp triangles and cubes, and Taxxons were long spheres of red and black. This world of geometric shapes was also familiar to Cassie. She saw it once before...

Cassie vaguely heard a cage door opening and felt her side hurt as she was thrown into it. Landing on the harder than steel floor, she looked up to see another woman looking over her.

She talked and her voice sounded like echoes. "Cassiieee....isssthatttt...youuuu?"

Then, turning on her side, Cassie saw the two faces of the Controllers, all fading and fuzzy. The man's eyes seemed to stand out the most. Blue eyes.... like winter ice.. like turquoise and diamonds and endless ocean...

Ms. Brown looked up from the body of the fallen girl and gasped. She whispered the suspicions that Cassie had all along.

"Susie? Allen? Is that you?"

Chapter 8

_Cold. Very cold. Wet.... yucky wet.... _

—

Dark everywhere. Scared.

Screams. Loud screams. Crying.... all sad...

And black. Black everywhere. Black boxes, black pool, black monsters..... Sticky, dirty, bad black.

Something very bad here.

Head hurt. Eyes look up....

Woman. Mother?

"Peter! Don't! God, no, don't take my Peter! Noooo!!" Mother yell loud. Mother cry? No, Mother no cry. Peter here....

Look around. Black and loud screams....

Monster! Lizard!

"Peter, run! Peter!! PETER!"

Mother here? Why is she here? No! Monster no take her! Mother? Mother!

Monster! You no take Mother! YOU NO TAKE HER!

No! Black pool. Why take here? No, monster no take! No! Mother no take! No! Water too black. No swim there.... why take Mother there! Very bad! No swim there! Death in black pool!

"Peter..!"

MOTHER!

Lizard push. NO! Mother no swim now! Mother swim death!

Pass black box. Loud screams come from box. Do not like. Too sad....scared... Cover ears. "Peter!"

Father? Turn to see.

Father, Father, you inside??

"Peter! Oh God damn it all! You're not taking my son!" Father mad, but he is crying... Lizard open black box to take other person out... no! Father don't do that!

Father run out of black box. Lizard get him... Father, no! You no fight.... lizard all around...

"Damn you!" Hit!

Father hit! Run! Hit too! Now! Father here.... safe...

"Peter, run!"

Run, run, run! Lizard, worm, all around. Run! Hide! Run!

"The stairs, son, the stairs!"

Faster! Faster! Faster!

Man yell, "Host escaping!" Lizard, worm, people chase....

Up stairs. Up. Up. Up....

"Run to the light!" Father say. "Run to the light!"

More sounds. One very strange...like in head....

Get them!

Higher. Up. Up.

"Run to the light!"

Turn. New monster! Horse monster! Blue..... but very black...

"Go!" Father push ahead.

See light! White light! Safe! Run to safe light! No, no more blackness!

Cut them off from the top! You, Jarknell, go up and get the prisoners!

Light! Light! No more blackness! See door behind. Hear scream....

Turn to look. Where Father???

You imbecile! Get that child! Kill him for all I care!

Kill? No, no kill now! Run.....

"The light!"

—

Cassie stirred a bit as she lay on the floor. _At least she isn't unconscious any longer..._ Ms. Brown thought. Putting her coat over the girl, she whispered, "I wonder what she's dreaming about? God,

what this girl has been through...."

With shaking hands, Ms. Brown reached in her pocket for a smoke, but found that they were empty, all except for the lighter, which was still nestled in the bottom of her coat pocket. She must have had the last one at Cassie's house. Sighing in frustration, she rubbed her hands together to stop their fidgeting. She stared at them and shook her head from side to side a bit. _God,_ she thought, _if I ever get out of this alive I promise to quit. Bad enough if monsters take my life; if I get through this, I won't let some dumb tobacco plant try and do the same thing._

--

Ms. Brown sighed and then thought about Peter, who never liked her smoking habit anyway. Her heart ached to know if he was okay. Did he manage to escape Chapman? Where was he now? And then came a memory of them, long ago, when Peter told her of people who cried underground....

A creak was heard as the metal door opened, letting the light in. Mrs. Brown shaded her eyes and hesitatively looked up. Quickly, her eyes widened in fear. A Hork-Bajir stomped into the room, turning its serpentine head this way and that, scanning the cage. Its serpentine eyes quickly focused towards the cell's occupants.

"_Lupik alba_, humans," it hissed and gestured out of the cell door.

Ms. Brown stared at the Hork-Bajir. She kneeled in front of Cassie as if shielding her. Clenching her shaking hands together, she stared straight into its yellow-green eyes.

"Go to hell," she growled.

The Hork-Bajir eyes widened slightly, and a deep growl shot out of the creature's mouth. "_Lupik alba_, human!" it snapped again.

Ms. Brown stared boldly back. "Go. To. Hell."

"Grrroar!" The Hork-Bajir grabbed her with its reptilian claws.

Ms. Brown felt her being through roughly against the harder-than-steel bars of the cage, pain shooting along her hip and side where she made contact. She looked up to see the Hork-Bajir's back to her, taking the defenseless Cassie first.

A motherly instinct washed over her. "You're not taking her, monster!" she spat and leaped upon the alien beast. With strength she never knew she had, the young teacher had her arms around the Hork-Bajir's thick scaly neck, trying with all her might to choke it while hanging on with all her might. The Hork-Bajir paid no heed to her actions other than with slight annoyance from those dragon eyes. It took a free hand and wrenched her off, catching her with the same arm, right on the bladed elbow. A silent gasp was heard and the woman grew still. Dark red flowed down the creature's arm. The Hork-Bajir gave that just a passing thought before it walked out of the cage.

_See the long monster-tail with sharp point. See the rough blue

horse-fur, long horse-leg. Strong front like a man, but strange head. Too many eyes..... and dark...endless dark..._

—

See dark monster-horse. Bad. Very very bad. Monster-horse never go away, even when sleep comes. Scared. Shudder....

"Peter, are you all right?" Ms. Brown say. She look at me. She look sad. "Is it about your Mother and Father?"

Yes! Want show. Want show all sad, slimy, evil things that Peter see. Want to tell of all the sad people crying underground. Want to tell about monsters...

People hide in the ground, Ms. Brown. They all sad these people... They live in black boxes underground. Monsters hurt them there...

Ms. Brown hold my hand in hers. "I know that you feel very sad right now," she say. "But I-I'm sure that your parents are safe, wherever they are."

No, Ms. Brown! Mother and Father are underground! With the monsters!

Ms. Brown wrap arms around. Strong hug.

Crying come falling down. Ms. Brown looks very sad, and starts crying too. "Oh Peter..." Ms. Brown shakes her head and wipes the crying off our faces.

—

The Hork-Bajir made his way through the swarm of other Hork-Bajir, Taxxons, and the few human Controllers. Taking the two up to his superior, the Controller by the human name of Allen Faulkner, the Hork-Bajir give a questionable growl. "Is Karmix 678 and Inhrel 255 ready for their hosts?" it asked in Hork-Bajir tongue.

His commander nodded and gestured to the woman. "Is she well-enough to be infested?" he replied in his human language. Inner ear translators solved any communication problems at the Yeerk pool.

The Hork-Bajir nodded. "Only a minor wound caused when the human tried to rebel. Easily repairable after the infestation."

The Controller shook his head. "You should know better than to damage the host! Get her fixed now," he said. "Then head to the infestation pier." A light of another life faintly showed in the man's eyes and someone from within seemed to sigh in relief of bought time for the two.

"Yes, sir." Shouldering the two, and careful not to injure them again, the Hork-Bajir headed toward the infirmary.

_Alone in room. Night here. Cannot sleep. Uncle sleep long ago.

—

—

Miss Mother. Miss Father. Cry. Can't stop crying.... All too much, too much!

"The light...."

Father? Mother?

"Head toward the light..." Look around room. Where light? Where are they?

"Tell the world.... make them see the light..."

Tell what, Mother? Where light?

"Show them the black. Make them see the light of truth. The light of truth shall show the black reality."

Show the black, show the black.....

Get up off bed. Turn on light. No, this isn't light that Mother and Father were saying. Have to show the dark that people don't know about. Have to show them the sad people underground, and the monster-worms, monster-lizards, monster-horse.

Take a hand. Put in clay. Soft and cold. Take some out.

Making long sharp tail, horse-legs, horse-body, man-arms. Make too many eyes, and black, darkness of the face, and the no mouth, and the rage and dark, darkness that is everywhere around.

A little horse-monster in my hands. I show this. Show this and more to the world. Make people see the light, light that say that dark is here, now. Maybe people can get rid of the dark forever that way...

—

Cassie groaned, thrashed her head wildly back and forth and started talking in a subdued urgency under her breath. "See the light, show the dark..."

The Hork-Bajir carrying her glared at the girl. It arrived at the infirmary and dumped the two ungracefully on a cot. "One has a cut to the side," he said. "My superior wants it repaired before she's infested."

Brushing the blonde hair from her face, Controller Susie Faulkner nodded and replied, "This'll be an easy job." Both the Yeerk and the real woman inside recognized Ms. Brown when she turned her over and saw Ms. Brown's dazed face. Ms. Brown's half-lidded eyes showed a faint plea for help as she gasped weakly.

Yet the Yeerk masked its and its host's reaction and took out the medical tools. With deft hands, she sealed up the flesh and cleaned up the blood so that the injury didn't even show.

"Take her away," the Yeerk spat. Inside, a woman was screaming frantically, calling out her friend's name and the name of her beloved son. The Yeerk tried to calm her down, but Susie was too

strong this time. Desperately, she tried to reach for the Hork-Bajir, but the Yeerk took control just in time. The Yeerk laughed to itself at its slyness and Susie cried. Yet from Cassie's back pocket, a silver object shimmered.

Cassie began to shake. "Show the light!" The Hork-Bajir clamped a claw over her nose and mouth as he carried them to the Yeerk pool. Yet instead of muffling Cassie's shouts, the sandpaper scales over her mouth and the lack of oxygen motivated her body enough to awake. Her eyes opened and a shock suddenly came to her all at once, seeing where she was with what she just experienced. "Show the light!" she gasped.

"Quiet, human!" The Hork-Bajir snapped. It was near the edge of the steel dock. An eerie iridescence glowed from the Yeerk pool beyond, reflecting shades of gray of its slimy surface. The Hork-Bajir grabbed hold of Cassie's arm and pushed her forward. "The light!" Cassie screamed. Something sharp was felt in Cassie's back pocket and she pulled it out. A Taxxon-sized scalpel, almost like a human dagger, was in her hand and she plunged it deep into the Hork-Bajir's arm.

The creature threw its head back and roared in pain, dropping the two in the process. Cassie scrambled to her feet and took to Ms. Brown's side.

"Cassie....where should we..?" Ms. Brown started, but trailed off.

Standing over the pier of the dock, they knew they was trapped. The Hork-Bajir pulled the blade from its arm and hollered. It took two steps forward, then swiped it's bloody arm at them. Cassie took a step backwards and teetered on the edge of the dock. Gray waters swirled beneath her, the silhouettes of thousands of Yeerks creating shadows in the disgusting swill.

The Hork-Bajir slashed again. Cassie fell herself falling backwards....

"Ahhhhhhh!!"

"No!" Ms. Brown grabbed at Cassie's hand and held it tight. "Hold on!"

But now they had the attention of the entire Yeerk pool. The dock was soon filled with massive Hork-Bajir and crawling Taxxons. But worst of all, a voice called from a far. A thought-speech voice to be exact.

What is going on here?!?

The voice of Visser Three.

Cassie panicked as she felt her hand slip from Ms. Brown's. Never had she been put into such a position. She wished that Jake was here, or Rachel, or any of the others. But Cassie knew that she brought this upon herself and so it was up to her to finish it.

She looked up at Ms. Brown. "Okay," she whispered, in as calm and clear a voice as she could possibly manage, "When I say so, you drop

me."

"Drop you??" Ms. Brown shot back. "What do you mean? Cassie-" She stopped to look behind her.

From behind, she saw a Hork-Bajir approach them. To the Yeerks, this sight was merely a spectacle to be seen. They all knew that they had the upper hand, and so they took their time in their actions. All of them were just waiting for the two to fall into the Yeerk pool. Whether by this incident or by usual force, either way both humans were inevitably going to become infested.

"Just do it," Cassie said, losing the little steadiness in her voice. "And take a deep breath and fall in too. Cover your ears, and as soon as you hit the water, stay under and kick. I want to see if we're can make it under the pier. Got it?"

Her companion nodded.

Cassie didn't waste a single moment. "Then drop!"

Ms. Brown let go.

Splash!

Holding in her shout, Cassie took a deep breath as she plunged into the pool. Putting her hands over her ears, she opened her eyes to the murky water and began to kick. Grayness covered her eyes and stuck to her morphing outfit, giving it a wretched, sticky feeling. Black shadows swarmed everywhere as Yeerks were feeding in the pool. Most sensed the sudden occupant in the water, but Cassie kicked harder and sped away. The Yeerks leech-like bodies moved against her and she felt like gagged. Her lungs begged for air and her eyes began to sting from the Yeerk pool liquid. Cassie prayed she kicked in the right direction and broke her head through the surface. A miracle! Cassie was under the pier. She lowered her head a bit as she swam to the steep embankment under the pier, so far back that it could be see by no one on the edge of the pool or on the pier. Cassie hugged her knees and stared out at the pool, sitting next to the drainage and maintenance duct that was next to the pool. Gray sludge flowed past her and into the duct. A second large form was vaguely seen under the water and flowed with that current. Then the teacher's head bobbed up. Cassie grabbed her hand and pulled her in before any of the Controller could see.

Ms. Brown coughed several times as she wiped the gray slime off her clothes. Her eyes went dim from all the danger and disgust she went through, and she turned her back to Cassie as she vomited onto the embankment. Her back still turned, she whispered in a nearly-savage tone, "They're watching for us... aren't they?"

Cassie nodded. All of the Controllers - and probably even Visser Three by now - had their eyes on the pool to see them come up infested.

Ms. Brown reached into her pocket for something to wipe her mouth with. Nothing turned up so she used her sleeve instead. Then, she paused as something was felt in her pocket. Ms. Brown turned to Cassie again, but this time, her hand-held lighter was in her clammy fist.

"Can this help?" Ms. Brown, in a desperate-driven state of exhaustion, put her hand to the sludgy waters. Then, with a casual _click_, she flicked the igniter.

A wave of hot flame seemed to flow out from the little fire and sweep over the top of the Yeerk pool. The Yeerk nutrients in the pool acted almost like an oil spill does when it's lighted over water; a film of red-orange flames covered the top of the Yeerk pool. The primitive light danced and flickered, send sparks through the air and panic throughout the cavern.

For a brief moment, Cassie was absolutely transfixed by the fire. She recalled Rachel or Marco joking about doing something like this to the Yeerk pool, taking flamethrowers and torching the place, but she never thought she's witness it actually happening.

PUT IT OUT!! PUT IT OUT, YOU IDIOTS!! Visser Three yelled from his place on the edge of the pool. The masses rushed back and forth, doing this and that in trying to put out the flames. For the fire had no where to go but down; the earth walls kept it from spreading, but the substance underneath the fire gave the inferno a place to burn.

Cassie and Ms. Brown crawled out from underneath the pier unnoticed. Pushed back and forth by frenzied alien monsters that was being ordered about by a raving Andalite-Controller, the two easily slipped through the crowd. Cassie looked behind her, and then remembered the drainage duct that was in the pool. If the fire spread down the duct and to the cleaning tank below, all of the available fuel and heat there could cause it to...

"Ms. Brown! We gotta go!" Cassie started running toward the nearest exit, followed by the woman. Their running called the Yeerks attention.

"_Ja helpot_ hosts!" a Hork-Bajir roared.

Cassie reached the stairway up and climbed the flight as fast as she could. Ahead, a tiny pinprick of white showed ahead. Light.

"C'mon! Run toward the light!" Cassie yelled behind her.

Taxxons skittered up the sides of the stairs and reached up toward them. Cassie kicked one of the giant worms right in its jelly red eyes, causing it to fall upon his comrades. She continued on, without looking back, because if she was right about that fire...

The explosion came unexpectedly. Cassie had just reached 100 steps within the exit, when she felt a shudder go from underneath her. The ground moved as if were in an earthquake and an immense wave of hot air washed over her. Cassie fell off-balance and hit the dirt steps. A sound similar to a sonic boom was heard and the temperature instantly went up. Grasping her way up, Cassie saw the orange glow behind her. Ahead was the glowing exit. With a weak hand, Cassie reached up and banged against the keypad at the front, then tumbled out into the cold open air.

Ms. Brown came a few minutes later, and both didn't move for a long time, as they caught their breath. Another rumble was heard from

below. Cassie guessed that the fuel storehouse she had seen earlier had also caught ablaze with explosive results.

In the back of her mind, Cassie feared that some Hork-Bajir or Taxxons would come out to get them, but no one came. The entranceway stood wide open, with the sound of burning mixing with shouts of order.

Finally, Cassie stood up on trembling legs. She didn't come out of the same way she came in; her surroundings were vastly different than Chapman's office. A pine forest was what she saw, misty and cool in the early morning haze. Ms. Brown also rose to her feet. She said nothing to Cassie, only placing her hands on her shoulders in a calm, but victorious manner. Together, they looked to the east, as the rising sun shed light upon the world.

Chapter 9

People rushed everywhere in the busy airplane terminal, as a group waited for their flight. Ereka reached into his jacket and brought out who slips of paper and a small packet of information.

"Here we go. Two new IDs for a Wendy Brown and a Peter Faulkner." Ereka handed them to Ms. Brown. "I located some other Chee via the our network system. Some of them work inside the government. Your real identities don't exist anymore."

She took the papers hesitantly and put a hand through her hair, which was newly cut and styled into short chestnut curls. Reading the names, she smiled. "Laura," she said. "I always liked that name."

"Well, it's yours for now on." Mr. King stood next to Ms. Brown and smiled. "You're Peter's mother too."

"Yeah..." Ms. Brown looked up at the child, now hers. Peter had something in his hands, as always, but looked up with smiling eyes at her. She returned the smile with one of her own.

The other Animorphs surrounded the two, filled with relief and gladness.

"Where are you going to go?" Rachel asked.

"Some of the Chee live outside the country," Mr. King said. "I'm going to take them to live with one of them. They'll be safe then and able to start a new life." Ms. Brown's face was flushed with excitement at that possibility.

"Then you can just give us a call then, wherever you go," Tobias said to her. He and Ax were in their human morphs for the occasion.

"And be careful. Are-ful," Ax added. "There could be other Yeerk pools around. It's best not to talk about your past."

"But don't get all paranoid about it," Marco joked. "Cassie didn't go through all of that to protect you just so that you can go to the loony bin."

Ms. Brown nodded mutely then went over to give each one a hug. "Thank

you for everything," she whispered tearfully.

Jake stood off to the side, trying to comfort Cassie. "Hey, their flight's going to leave in a few minutes," he told her. "Don't you want to say good-bye?"

Cassie sniffed as she folded the local paper she held in her hands. The cover story, a report about how a local school had been closed for repairs because of an unknown fire the other day, had greatly disturbed her. Along with a photograph of the blackened school, were two pictures of a man and woman whose bodies were found in the blaze. What was so mysterious was that they have been missing for the past six months. Police were still investigating why Allen and Susie Faulkner were found at the school.

"I could have..." Cassie started.

Jake put his arms around her from behind and rested his head on her shoulder. "Life is full if 'could haves' and 'what ifs,'" he said. "You just did what you needed to do. We can't save everyone, but we try to do as much as we can."

Cassie nodded as her beliefs were once again been laid before her. "But you still can't help but think..." She shook her head and walked over the Ms. Brown and Peter. Ms. Brown hugged her tightly in a caring farewell embrace. "Without you, Cassie, I don't know where we'd be," she said softly. "I don't know how to say how much I'm so grateful to everything you did."

Cassie hugged her back. "I know."

They let go, and Peter stepped forward. Everyone grew quiet, uncertain about what he was going to do. Slowly, Peter placed the object in his hands into hers. Then he rested his forehead so that it touched hers. Cassie had her head raised up, for Peter was almost a foot taller. From this position, she thought he was going to kiss her, but he didn't. Carefully, he placed his hands on her shoulders and just looked into her eyes. Cassie saw into those eyes a world that she had experienced herself. His eyes expressed all the emotion he couldn't express any other way. Cassie smiled as he calmly backed away, keeping Peter's message to herself.

Over the loudspeaker, the number and destination of their flight was called. Mr. King put on his coat. "It's time," he said.

Ms. Brown nodded and slipped her hand into Peter's. Then, together they headed down flight the terminal and disappeared.

Cassie heard her friends call good-bye as the trio vanished from view, and she herself gave a small wave. Then her eyes turned to the sculpture in her hands. It was a clay model of a young woman's face, half-formed in the clay. The young woman's face looked as if she was begin lifted out of a sea of water, as if being re-born. The features were fuzzy and unfinished, some more defined than others. Yet somehow Cassie had the feeling that Peter had meant to leave it that way.

What she held in her hands was Peter's creation, yet it wasn't totally his. Peter took this young woman and formed what he could; the kindness in her face, the tenderness in her smile, the graceful

curve of the cheek and the compassion in her eyes. But so much more still had to be defined in this young woman. Cassie felt the smooth clay under her fingertips, and knew that she was not yet finished. There were many things left untouched within her that needed to be shaped, that needed to be decided, that needed to be known. What she had been through was only one of the adventures in her life that would define who she really was.

What Peter had started here revealed what Cassie already had. Now it was her turn to finish the creation - the determination of her soul.

End
file.